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International Panel Recommends Continued U.S. BSE Prevention Focus
Say measures more important than finding all cows in associated herds

An international team of experts has endorsed the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) focus on ensuring strong systems are in place to prevent the spread of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), a senior department official says.

In a January 26 press briefing in Washington, Ron DeHaven, USDA chief veterinary officer, reported that the panel said a strong surveillance system is more important than finding all of the cattle that entered the United State from Canada in 2001 along with the cow that tested positive in December for BSE. The cow was from a herd in Washington state.

The panel he said, was impressed with U.S. animal tracking efforts.

DeHaven, who recently returned from Japan with other officials from USDA and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), said the United States had reached no agreement with Japan to resume trade in beef. Japan has banned the import of U.S. beef since shortly after the BSE case was announced.

The official added that another meeting with U.S. and Japanese officials will take place in February, soon after the international panel submits to USDA a report that could include recommendations for further modifications to U.S. BSE-prevention safeguards.

USDA has tracked 28 of the 80 cows that came to Washington from Canada along with the infected animal, DeHaven said. In total, he said, the department has slaughtered and tested negative 131 cows that had come in contact with the infected cow. USDA is waiting for test results from an additional 35 cows originally from Canada that were born either a year before or a year after the infected cow and that may have eaten the same feed, he said.

Feed containing infected ruminant material is a cause of the spread of BSE. The United States since 1997 has been banned use in animal feed of those parts of animals, such as the brain and spinal cord, that might be infected with BSE.

U.S. officials have recently visited the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and China to explain measures in place to ensure the safety of U.S. beef, USDA Senior Advisor on Trade David Hegwood said at the briefing.

Following is the transcript of the USDA press briefing:

(begin transcript)

Safeguards Against Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE)
Technical Briefing
USDA Chief Veterinary Officer Ron DeHaven
David Hegwood, Senior Advisor on International Trade
Washington D.C.
January 26, 2004

DEHAVEN: We have continued our effort to identify those animals of interest, primarily the 81 head that entered the United States from the birth herd in Alberta, Canada. These are the 81

included on a health certificate that entered the U.S. in September of 2001 and that 81 includes the cow that tested positive at the slaughter plant in the state of Washington.

We've been working to narrow the population of animals in various herds that we have epidemiologically linked to those 81, and we have been able to positively identify 28 of those 81 animals; but in the process of going through those herds we have reduced the number of animals or reduced the population of those of interest by eliminating from consideration or concern any animals in those epidemiologically traced herds that are of the wrong age -- in other words, not of the age span that we would anticipate these animals of being -- by ruling out any through records on those farms that we can definitively say were born on that farm or that entered those herds of interest at a time inconsistent when we know these 81 animals left.

So through that process of elimination and tracing to those herds, we've been able to positively identify 28 of those animals, and in those larger groups of animals within these multiple herds very likely have others within that group of 81 animals that we're looking for that would have originated from the birth herd in Alberta, Canada.

As we are narrowing those populations of animals in these dairy herds -- and some of them are quite large -- we are euthanizing and testing animals that would be either those animals that we have positively identified as part of the 81, or those that we can't rule out as not being part of those 81. To that end in the index dairy herd in Mabton, Washington, we have sacrificed and tested 131 animals, all of them negative both to a screening test as well as the gold standard immunohistochemistry test. From the dairy finishing farm in Mattawa, Washington, we have sacrificed and tested negative 39 of those animals. And then from two other herds -- one in Connell, Washington and another in Boardman, Oregon -- we have taken a respective 15 and 20 animals, and those tests are still pending. So we do not have test results on those yet.

Recognizing that this is not a contagious disease, and if we can identify those animals that might be of concern or might possibly be from that birth herd in Alberta, we can then safely release the hold orders on all of those herds once those animals have left those farms. And so to that end we have actually released five hold orders -- one on the Mabton, Washington, farm; the dairy finishing farm in Mattawa, Washington; the calf raising operation in Sunnyside, Washington; as well as the two herds that I just mentioned -- one in Connell, Washington, and the other one in Boardman, Oregon. So we have removed from those herds any of the animals of interest and have either tested them negative or have test results that are pending and because of that then have released the hold orders on all of those.

Let me clarify one particularly important point that goes to the science of this disease as well as the international standard. Indeed we have been focusing our efforts on those 81 animals that may have come from the birth herd or that we know came from the birth herd and trying to locate them in the United States. However, we also know that the international standards would say the animals of particular concern or those animals of significance are those that are born a year before or a year after the positive animal. The reason for that two-year window is because it's presumed that the feed that would have infected the positive animal would have been consumed during that two-year window by any other animals in the herd that might then be exposed. So we've got a two-year window where we would consider the highest risk of animals consuming contaminated feed. And so by international standards we should focus our efforts not on all animals from the herd but rather those animals that would have been born within a two-year window of the birth of the infected cow.

So taking that into consideration, we are now really focusing our effort on the 25 animals out of that 81 that fit into that two-year window. So we are, again, focusing our remaining epidemiological investigation on the 25 animals of those 81.

We've also evaluated culling practices and not just within the dairy industry but specifically within the dairy industry in that part of the country, and by evaluating normal culling practices we would

have expected several of those 25 animals to have been culled from the herd by now. And taking that into account, we would estimate that it's very likely that only 11 of those 25 would still be alive.

In fact, we have found 14 of those 25 and so consider our epidemiological tracing to be quite remarkable. And in fact the international review team that was here was quite impressed with the fact that we'd been able to find that many of those 25 animals that would be of the most significance.

I think it's clear that we will not be able to positively identify all 25 of those animals because while we have found 14 of them, no doubt some of them have been culled, and I suspect we have some of the remaining 11 animals out of the 25 that might be included in those populations of interest in those herds that we have inventoried and gone through. But because they've lost identification we may not be able to positively identify as part of those 25.

Having said that, we again would make every assurance that we don't think those animals are of particular concern, either from a public health or an animal health perspective. The reason I say that is because even at the height of the infection and the prevalence of the disease and the U.K. [United Kingdom], it was very rare to find more than one or two animals in any given herd that were positive. And so we wouldn't expect there to be necessarily any more or certainly not more than just one or two other animals in that Alberta herd that would be positive.

Second, if any of them had been exhibiting central nervous system disorder at the time of slaughter they would have been condemned. We now of course have procedures in place that keep non-ambulatory animals from entering into the human food chain. And of course for animals over 30 months of age we're removing the specified risk materials, that portion of the carcass that is likely to be infective if an animal would happen to be positive. All of those tissues are being excluded from the human food chain.

We have had in place since August of 1997 a ruminant-to-ruminant feed ban, and knowing that that is the primary if not the only means of spread of this disease that would have kept the transmission of any of those animals having been positive to other positives. Again, the feed ban, the most important factor, in terms of preventing spread of the disease from animal to animal.

I think it's also important to note that there is, based on the scientific research, no reason to be concerned about the safety of the milk or other dairy products that would come even from a herd with a positive animal in it. And other than the one herd in Mabton, Washington, we have no evidence that we have anything other than the single positive animal. But even if there are, again the science is quite clear that the milk and dairy products even from a positive herd represent no risk in terms of public health.

I mentioned that we did have a visit by the International Review Team. We had representatives from Switzerland, Dr. Ulrich Kihm, and Dr. Dagmar Heim. We had a representative from the United States, Dr. Will Hueston, who's the director of the Center for Animal Health and Food Safety at the University of Minnesota. And we had Dr. Stuart Mac Diarmid who's the principal advisor on zoonotic and animal health for the New Zealand Food Safety Authority.

We also had a last minute addition to that team, Dr. Danny Matthews, a TSE program coordinator in the U.K., and certainly based on the prevalence of the disease and all of the activity in the U.K. as it relates to BSE a world-recognized expert in BSE. So we were glad to be able to add Danny Matthews to that team.

The International Review Team asked a lot of questions. I felt quite satisfied in my exit interview with them that they felt that we had answered all of the questions or provided all of the information that they needed. They are now in the process of compiling a report, and we would hope to have that report presented to us in about two weeks time.

With that, let me pause and allow David Hegwood to address from the international perspective. David, or do we want to just go to questions?

HEGWOOD: If I can just say a few words. I just returned from Japan where we had meetings, a second series of meetings with the Japanese government since the outbreak of this disease. And the purpose of our discussions this time was to explain all of the measures we have taken since the outbreak of the disease and to begin the discussion of the conditions for resuming trade with Japan.

We did not certainly reach any agreement with the Japanese government on resuming trade. We did both agree that we need to get trade moving again as quickly as possible. The trade restrictions the Japanese have put in place, as well as other countries have put in place are causing serious economic damage, both to the US industry as well as to many economic interests in Japan. So it's in both of our interest to get trade moving again as quickly as possible.

We did agree that we would try to meet again next month after the report from the International Review Team has been completed and have some more detailed discussions about the conditions for resuming trade.

QUESTION: Do you have at this point, Dr. DeHaven, a better sense for how long this investigation or when this investigation may head towards completion?

DEHAVEN: I think we're talking in terms of days or weeks rather than months. Clearly, we want to follow every lead that we get to the extent that it's practical to do so. In one of the earlier press briefings I mentioned that epidemiological investigations typically become a tangled web, and this one is no exception to that. You can imagine as we started to trace those 81 animals we go to the most, based on the records that we have, the information in terms of where they would have gone to or most likely went to when they first entered the United States. And that was 15 or 16 premises. You go to those premises and start looking at their records and then find additional records to show where some of those animals may have gone to other premises. So that leads you to 50 or 60 additional premises once you've done that to all 15 or 16 initial grouping. And then the same process. So you very quickly are into an exponentially increasing number of premises.

We have to draw a reasonable line in the sand, if you will, in terms of at some point we reach a line of diminishing returns. And so we will follow what we consider to be any likely leads. We inventory those herds. And through the process of elimination I mentioned where we can rule out most of those herds based on birth-dates that are inconsistent with the animals that we're looking for -- to the extent that we can find records on those farms to show that they were born on those farms and weren't herd additions. For those that were herd additions but were added at the wrong time to be part of these.

So to any of those premises where we are able to positively identify any of those 81 based on animal identification, then any that we can't rule out as also not being part of that we will sacrifice and test those animals.

I think that we can wrap the investigation up in a matter of several days to just a couple of weeks.

Q: And if I may follow up quickly, Mr. Hegwood, how important is it to complete this investigation if we're going to reopen beef trade at all?

HEGWOOD: Well, I think completing the investigation is certainly one of the steps that we have to take, though our strongest arguments are the measures that we've already put in place, and that's what we're trying to focus our discussion.

Q: Dr. DeHaven, I think you comprehensively asked the question about completion. But do I take it from your remarks that if necessary you would announce that you had completed the investigation even if you haven't found all those 81 animals?

Under those circumstances, how important would the International Review Team's report be?

And just as a follow-up question, have you looked at, or considered the possibility of looking for, any of the thousands of Canadian dairy and breeding cattle that have entered the United States in previous years, something like six years, 75,000 over each of the last several years?

DEHAVEN: Thank you. Let me clarify, too, one point that I made earlier about the 81, and indeed the initial focus of our investigation was on those 81. But as has been pointed out to us by the International Review Team and is clearly stated in the international standards, really the animals that we should focus on would not be all animals from that birth herd in Alberta, Canada, but rather those that were born in a two-year window -- one year on either side of the birth-date of this positive cow.

And so really the focus would be on those 25 animals, and a suggestion that the other remaining animals -- while we would certainly follow strong leads that we may have on those -- they would be of much lesser importance than the 25.

So we have found 14 of the 25 at this point definitively. We suspect that several others could be included in these larger groups of animals that we are sacrificing and testing from the herds that we are led to by the epidemiological investigation.

But also, as I said, we would fully expect at this point not to be able to definitively identify all 25 of those animals. Indeed, as was pointed out by the International Review Team, they felt it quite remarkable that we had already found 14 of the 25, especially given the culling practices where we would only expect to find about 11.

I would just reiterate the points that I made about the relative safety of public health and animal health even if we don't find all of those animals, in that the measures have been in place and the Secretary [Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman] has recently announced strengthening several measures that add additional safeguards to the public health.

So we think that those concerns are adequately addressed. Indeed, in the exit interview with the International Review Team they stressed the need to not focus on these animals that have entered but, rather, focus resources and efforts on proactive strategies to ensure that we have a good surveillance system in place, that we've got the appropriate feed ban, that we've got other measures in place which will be part of their report when they deliver it to us in a couple of weeks.

As to the numbers of cattle that have already entered the United States from Canada and any effort to trace those -- again, as you mentioned those numbers are very, very high. And we feel at this point the most appropriate way to deal with that population of animals is through the measures that have been put in place: namely, a good feed ban to ensure that we don't have animal-to-animal dissemination of the disease; the removal of the specified risk materials that would represent any possible public health risk; to ensure that we have a good surveillance program in place to determine if we have any additional animals or, if so, what prevalence of the disease we have in this country -- to which I would quickly add, we've had a good surveillance program in place for some 13 years. And so we feel quite comfortable that if we have additional cases, the prevalence of the disease is quite low.

Q: My question is, do you know how many cattle have already, that are part of these five formerly quarantined herds that have been already released from the farm and maybe have been slaughtered into meat processing plants? And as a follow-up, how can, since there are still some

cattle that are still being investigated, how are USDA officials completely positive that these animals may not be part of the herd?

DEHAVEN: We have taken 205 animals of interest thus far from the herds that we have led through our epidemiological investigation. And this would be in addition to the 449 calves on the calf-raising operation as well.

So we have sacrificed and submitted for testing, samples from 205 animals of interest. We know that those animals included a number of positive traces or animals that we know were part of that 81 as well as the majority of them which were animals that could have been part of the 81 but we couldn't say definitively.

Of those 205 that have been sacrificed thus far, we have negative results on 170 of them with results pending on the remaining 35 and should have those results coming up shortly.

Our process is -- recognizing that some of these ear-tags may have been put in several months or several years ago, and the possibility that animals can lose that identification or can be replaced by other identification when they get into a new herd -- we have gone through this process that I described of identifying those animals that we can't positively say didn't come out of the herd in Alberta and sacrificing those whole groups. And that's how we've come up with those 205.

We have other herds that we are doing a herd inventory on, going through the similar process. And so we will be sacrificing animals from other herds as part of this entire effort.

Again, for those that we don't definitively identify, they could be included in these groups. For the others that may have gone to slaughter we have the firewalls and safeguards in place that I mentioned a couple of times now.

Q: Mr. Hegwood, I understand that Japan didn't ban ruminant-to-ruminant feeding until October 5, just after it found its first case of mad cow. And I guess my question to you both is, does that give us some leverage with the Japanese as to whether we should have universal testing or not? And just what kind of discussion have you talked about with the Japanese about things like expanding the feed ban or also doing some more testing as has been requested, I think?

HEGWOOD: Well, you're right. Japan did not put its feed ban in place until October 2001 after their first find in September of 2001. And we think that we've had a much more effective feed ban in place for longer, and consequently we believe for that and other reasons that we are in the lower risk category for BSE than Japan is and that any notion of equivalence in the measures we have in place to protect against BSE should take that difference in risk categorization into account.

We haven't talked specifically about additional steps that we would take to resume trade with Japan. We did not make any specific offers when we were in Tokyo. We did outline for them all the steps we had taken. We reviewed the results of the Japanese Technical Team visit to the United States which concluded just over a week ago.

And our position is that the measures that we have put in place are what is required of us under -- according to the OIE guidelines. And that should be acceptable for all countries including Japan.

DEHAVEN: I would remind everyone that this is a disease with a very long incubation period -- typically three to eight years. And while there have been a handful of cases found in animals under 30 months of age by far and away it's a disease of animals 32 months of age and older. Hence, the focus on removal of specified risk materials from animals over 30 months of age, et cetera.

To suggest that we would test all animals regardless of age at slaughter is not consistent with that science and what we know about the disease -- again, being a disease with an incubation period of three to eight years and almost exclusively a disease of animals 30 months of age and over.

We have updated the risk assessment that Harvard did following the find in May. We are evaluating our risk and will certainly rely very heavily on the recommendations from the International Review Team that we should receive in a couple of weeks with regard to additional enhancements to our overall program and measures.

But again, we've had a good system in place. The safeguards were put in place by and large long before they were put in place by Japan and some other countries. So to make the comparison between the U.S. and some other countries that have experienced a high prevalence of the disease would be inconsistent with what we know about the level of exposure, about what we know about the disease, and therefore inconsistent with the risk assessment that would apply to the U.S. as opposed to some other countries.

Q: Where does the investigation go from here, and are you considering other options that you might have other than what we're talking about here today?

DEHAVEN: From our standpoint where we go from here is to follow all serious leads on our epidemiological investigation, get into those herds of concern, conduct inventories, look for animals particularly that would be part of those 25, test any animals from those herds that we can't rule out as not being part of those, and wrap this investigation up again in a matter of several days to a few weeks.

We would also, as I mentioned, take into serious consideration the recommendations that will be forthcoming from the International Review Team and then make any decisions with regard to recommendations from that group once they're available.

HEGWOOD: On the trade side we've been engaging with a number of counties. Just in the past week we've had teams in the Philippines, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and China talking with officials in those countries about the measures that we put in place. And once we have completed the investigation and gotten the report from the International Review Team, we will be in a position to begin engaging with all of those countries on resuming trade.

And again, our position is the measures that we've put in place are consistent with the OIE guidelines and therefore should be sufficient for these countries to begin resuming trade with us.

Q: The question is, if there's some animals that might be left out there with, that have not been tested, not been fully cleared, why should Americans feel that you have exhausted all the possibilities in trying to find all the cases of mad cow?

DEHAVEN: Well, as I mentioned, from a practical standpoint because of the likelihood that several of these animals would have lost their identification, its simply not possible to trace them, and the fact that we could indeed continue this investigation into months and months of tracing all possible leads, and still at the end of the day not be able to identify every one of these animals -- at some point you reach a point of diminishing returns.

When in fact we could have included many of those 25 animals in these larger populations that we are sacrificing and testing from the herds that lead us to. And probably more importantly is the fact that we've got the appropriate safeguards in place to protect animal health and public health should any of them be slaughtered.

So it's not a matter of unwillingness to do that. It's a matter of from a practical standpoint of what is reasonable to do.

Again, I would also emphasize that this International Review Team of subcommittee suggested that we have already expended more resources than what there are in terms of potential returns, recognizing some of the practicalities of not being able to trace necessarily every one of these animals, recognizing the safeguards that are in place and also recognizing that there is far more potential return on investment of resources towards ensuring that we have the appropriate procedures and processes in place for the future.

So I think that we'll have confirmation of that in terms of a written report coming from the International Review Team or subcommittee.

This might be a good point for me to explain too that within the Department we have an Advisory Committee, a Secretary's Advisory Committee for Foreign Animal and Poultry Diseases. And this is the group that is officially recognized and tasked with advising the Secretary on matters of foreign animal diseases and poultry. And indeed BSE is a foreign animal disease in the United States. And that group is duly constituted under the Federal Advisory Committee Act.

Because this group, this International Review Team is in essence operating in an advisory capacity to the Secretary, it's functioning as a subcommittee of the Foreign Animal and Poultry Disease Committee. And so their report when it's delivered in a couple of weeks will be actually a report delivered to the Secretary's Advisory Committee, and of course then the recommendations go on to the Secretary.

Q: Is there any combination of circumstances that would have us consider testing all fodder cattle, at least all fodder cattle that was headed towards the Japanese market?

HEGWOOD: Well, the, one, it's scientifically not necessary, not justified, and we don't want to go down that road because it diverts resources from where we really need to be putting them and doing surveillance and taking other risk mitigation measures for this disease.

Second, the cost is considerable. While Japan represents a fairly small portion of total U.S. cattle slaughter, some part of 90 percent of every animal slaughtered in the U.S. is likely to end up in the Japanese market -- which means we would have to test 90 percent of the cattle slaughtered for Japan. And a rough calculation of the cost of that is about $900 million. And the total market value of Japan is about $1 billion. So it's just not worth it economically to go down that road; nor is it justified scientifically.

Q: Are there any other companies whose systems are certified for tracking cattle? And does the USDA see mandatory tracking in the near future? Could you give some kind of timetable?

DEHAVEN: I am not sure. Let me clarify with your comment about certification. I am not familiar with what certification you might be talking about.

Q: PVP (sp) certification. Early this month USDA announced that it had certified [an] emerged interactive animal tracking system.

DEHAVEN: For the purpose of animal disease tracking?

Q: Just tracking cattle so you'd know where they came from, and if cattle would get sick you could trace it, trace the path backwards. The USDA announced it would emerge last --

DEHAVEN: We'll simply have to get back to you on that because we're -- I'm not familiar with all of our ongoing effort to develop an animal ID [identification] or tracking system with that particular technology, or where it may be going. But instead let me just mention again that as part of the Secretary's announcements on December 30 was an intent to accelerate the implementation of an animal identification system recognizing that we certainly need it for BSE tracking purposes but also for other animal disease purposes as well, any number of potential uses for that.

Certainly from my perspective as the chief veterinary officer needing to be able, particularly for highly contagious diseases, to be able to trace animals very quickly.

That system would certainly be very dependent upon technology because if we are going to have a system that allows us to trace animals in a number of hours it will have to be electronic-based and there will have to be a national database of animal movement. There has been a considerable evaluation of the possible technologies that might be used for that purpose, and part of what we're evaluating now is the various technologies that might be used for animal identification and tracking purposes.

For further questions you can always call us at 202-720-4623, or you can check our website at HYPERLINK "http://www.usda.gov/" . We hope to have an update posted later today as well as transcripts from this call.

(end transcript)